

**Title:** Alexander Hamilton: Most Likely to Succeed?

**Grade Level:** 6 – 8

**Time Allotment:** 1 45-minute class period, plus homework

**Overview:** Alexander Hamilton, one of America’s “founding fathers,” rose from his non-traditional roots as a boy in the Caribbean to become one of the most important figures in the founding of our country. Using video segments from the PBS program *Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*, this activity encourages students to explore the conditions and circumstances of Hamilton’s youth and the strengths he carried with him into his adult life. As a culmination, students are encouraged to reflect on their own lives and think about how, like Hamilton, they might translate their childhood experiences into success later in life.

This lesson is best used at the beginning of a unit on the American Revolution. Students should already be familiar with several of the key figures in early American history and the Revolution.

**Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

- Describe Alexander Hamilton’s childhood and early life on the islands of Nevis and St. Croix;
- Discuss how conditions of his early life influenced decisions he made as an adult;
- Make connections between the events of his early life and his contributions to pre- and post-revolutionary America.
- Reflect upon how their own current decisions might impact their success later in life.

**Standards**

<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1>

**Historical Thinking Standard 2**

Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved--their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.

Appreciate historical perspectives--the ability (a) describing the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like; (b) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded--the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place; and (c) avoiding "present-mindedness," judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

*Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton* is a production of Manifold Productions, Inc., in association with WNET/Thirteen in New York City. Funding for **Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton** was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, BNY Mellon, the John Templeton Foundation, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Roger and Susan Hertog, the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, The Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Gilder Foundation.

### 3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

#### Historical Thinking Standard 3

Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.

Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind multiple causation including (a) the importance of the individual in history; (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational.

#### Media Resources:

##### Video:

- **The Making of A Great Man**

How the early event of Alexander Hamilton's life affected the man he was to become.

##### Websites:

American Experience | Alexander Hamilton | Timeline

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/hamilton/timeline/index.html>

This timeline, from the PBS series *American Experience* presents details of Alexander Hamilton's life alongside significant events in American history.

##### Materials:

For each pair or group of students:

- Computer with internet access, or printout of timeline

For the class:

- Computer, projector, and screen

##### Prep for Teachers:

Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:

Preview all the video segment and website used in the lesson. Please note that the video segment included in this lesson contains strong language and content that, while appropriate for middle school level students, is not traditionally found in classrooms.

Download the video clips used in the lesson to your classroom computer(s) or prepare to watch them using your classroom's Internet connection.

Bookmark all websites that you plan to use in the lesson on each computer in your classroom. Using a social bookmarking tool such as [delicious.com](http://delicious.com) or [diigo](http://diigo.com) (or an online bookmarking utility such as [portaportal](http://portaportal.com)) will allow you to organize all the links in a central location.

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If you will be using handouts of the “Timeline: Alexander Hamilton Chronology” instead of asking students to view it on computers, make enough copies to distribute to students.

### **INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY**

1. Begin by reviewing with students what they have already learned about the “founding fathers” and important figures in the early history of what became the United States. Tell students that there is one man who contributed quite a lot to the founding of our nation who had a very different story than the other founding fathers – Alexander Hamilton. Ask students what, if anything, they already know about Hamilton. *(They may say that they know he is on the ten dollar bill, or that he was never president. If they do not provide these answers, you may wish to prompt them with hints, like “You might be able to find him in your wallet,” or “He dreamed of taking charge, but never made it all the way to the top.”)*
2. Explain to students that one of the main differences that set Hamilton apart from other notable figures in early American politics is that he was not born in the thirteen colonies. He was born on the island of Nevis, in the Caribbean Sea, and spent his childhood both there and on the island of St. Croix (which is now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands). Tell students that you are going to show them a video clip about Hamilton’s childhood on the islands. As they watch the clip, ask students to observe the conditions under which Hamilton grew up, and to write their observations in their notebooks. Play clip, “The Making of a Great Man.” When the clip is over, ask students to share some of their observations. *(Some of their observations may include: Hamilton’s father was the descendant of a Scottish noble, Hamilton played around cannons as a child, he heard slaves crying while he was trying to sleep at night, his family moved when he was eight years old, his mother spent time in prison, his father left the family when he was nine years old, his mother opened a store and he worked as a clerk, he worked around many different types of people, he learned that one can earn one’s way to a different stage in life.)*
3. Ask students how they think these characteristics might be similar or different to some of the other “founding fathers” and important American historical figures about whom they have been learning. Do students think that Hamilton’s childhood was easy or difficult, and why? Would someone like Alexander Hamilton have an easy or difficult time succeeding in American politics today? How are the characteristics of Hamilton’s childhood similar or different to some of our contemporary American political figures? Encourage class discussion.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY**

1. Although Alexander Hamilton may have had a less-than-traditional start to his successful political career, the circumstances of his early life led to later accomplishments all the same. Tell students that you are going to show them the video clip again, only this time they should write down the aspects of Hamilton’s childhood that the narrator and people interviewed in the clip specifically believe had an impact on his adult life. Play clip, “The Making of a Great Man” again. Ask students to share their observations. *(Their observations should include: living and playing near battery/cannon gave him a taste for artillery; living near slave quarters led him to be anti-slavery in his adult life; he didn’t necessarily need a father figure in his life; his experiences as a clerk helped develop his skills for commerce and managing people.)*

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2. Direct the class to the Timeline at the Alexander Hamilton American Experience website (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/hamilton/timeline/index.html>). (If you do not have access to computers in your classroom, print out the timeline and distribute one copy to each student.) Split the class into three groups, and ask each group to focus on one aspect of Hamilton's childhood that influenced his adult life and political success: 1) taste and desire for war, 2) anti-slavery attitudes and understanding of different types of people, 3) commerce and management. Students should read through the timeline and note any events that they think correspond with their theme. Students can work in pairs or small groups if desired. Give students 15 – 20 minute to complete the activity.
3. When students have finished, go through the timeline as a class, and ask students which themes they chose for each event and why. (There are some events for which they may not have chosen a theme, and some for which they may have chosen more than one.) Encourage discussion among students as to how the events and circumstance of Hamilton's childhood on the island influenced his actions described on the timeline.
4. Ask students how they think Hamilton was able to turn his non-traditional childhood and upbringing into success in the political and public realm? Some things to emphasize with students are: his early experience with business and people management, the support from Nicholas Cruger and others on St. Croix to send him to the United States for education, his relationship with George Washington, and his military experience.

### **CULMINATING ACTIVITY**

1. Students have seen how Alexander Hamilton was able to translate the experiences of his youth into success in his adult life. Ask students if they think, based on the previous activities, Hamilton "lucked into" his success, set goals for himself to achieve, or was it a combination? Encourage discussion; there is no "right" answer.
2. Ask students to take a few minutes to think about their own experiences up to this point in their lives: where they have lived, what they have done, who they have known. Have students write down five events, circumstances, places, people, etc. from their lives that they think will influence them in their future educational or life paths. *(Note to educator: this activity has the potential to bring up difficult or unpleasant memories for students who have faced significant hardships in their own lives. You may wish to remind students of the difficulties Hamilton himself faced in his childhood, such as the departure of his father, yellow fever, and the death of his mother. If desired, this activity can be modified in a variety of ways. For example, students may wish to reflect on experiences that have only happened in your classroom, or only in the past year. If a student is unable or unwilling to complete the activity with autobiographical information, he or she may think of a favorite character from a book or movie instead.)*
3. For homework, ask students to write a short essay, draw a picture, or make a short video describing how the five things they wrote down might contribute to or influence their success as they grow older.

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